

# **A GUIDE TO CHRISTIAN SPIRITUAL FORMATION: HOW SCRIPTURE, SPIRIT, COMMUNITY, AND MISSION SHAPE OUR SOULS. BY EVAN B. HOWARD.**

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## **Abstract**

Although interest in Christian spiritual formation among evangelicals, especially in Western society, has been at a critical stage, Howard stresses the importance of Christian spiritual formation. Christian spiritual formation helps individuals and Christian communities grow deeper in their relationship with the Triune God because in it the Holy Spirit, Scripture, community, and mission are interconnected with one another. Furthermore, without Christian spiritual formation, Christian institutions find it difficult to perform their roles well. Therefore, this book challenges Christian leaders such as educators, pastors, spiritual directors, and other church leaders to become God's instruments in transforming believers to have Christlike character in their lives.

**Keywords:** Christian spiritual formation, Holy Spirit, Christlike character, transformation.

### **Abstrak**

Meskipun minat dalam formasi rohani Kristen di kalangan kaum Injili, khususnya di masyarakat Barat, telah berada pada tahap kritis, Howard menegaskan pentingnya formasi rohani Kristen. Formasi rohani Kristen membantu individu-individu dan komunitas-komunitas Kristen untuk bertumbuh lebih dalam terkait hubungan mereka dengan Allah Tritunggal karena didalamnya Roh Kudus, Alkitab, komunitas, dan misi saling berhubungan satu sama lain. Lebih jauh lagi, tanpa formasi rohani Kristen, lembaga-lembaga Kristen sulit melakukan perannya dengan baik. Oleh karena itu, buku ini menantang para pemimpin Kristen seperti pendidik, pendeta, direktur spiritual, dan pemimpin-pemimpin gereja lainnya untuk menjadi alat Tuhan dalam mengubah orang-orang Kristen agar dapat memiliki karakter seperti Kristus dalam kehidupan mereka.

**Kata Kunci:** formasi rohani Kristen, Roh Kudus, karakter Kristus, transformasi.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Evan B. Howard's book, *A Guide To Christian Spiritual Formation: How Scripture, Spirit, Community, and Mission Shape Our Souls*, is a challenge and reminder to the Christian institutions to focus their attention more intensely on Christian spiritual formation. Dr. Howard is the founder and director of Spirituality Shoppe: An Evangelical Center for the Study of Christian Spirituality and affiliate associate professor of Christian Spirituality at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California. In his book, he reminds us that interest in Christian spiritual formation among evangelicals has been at a critical stage. He argues that without Christian spiritual formation, Christian institutions are difficult to do their roles well. This book is very useful for Christian educators, pastors, spiritual directors, church leaders, and congregation members who are interested to learn more about Christian spiritual formation. The main claim of this book is Christian spiritual formation matters because it helps Christian individuals and communities grow more deeply in their relationship with the Triune God (p. 18).

This book is divided into four parts. Part 1 (chapters 1-2) addresses “The Basics” of Christian spiritual formation; Part 2 (chapters 3-6) addresses “The Elements” of Christian spiritual formation; Part 3 (chapters 7-11) addresses “The Practice” of Christian spiritual formation; and Part 4 (chapter 12) addresses “The Ministry” of Christian spiritual formation. The author ends this book by providing an epilogue regarding his personal history of spiritual formation.

### **The Basics of Christian Spiritual Formation**

In chapter 1, the author starts his book by mentioning a short but firm claim: “Christian spiritual formation matters.” For him, this is the most fundamental principle regarding Christian spiritual formation. To support his claim, he explores some key terms: Christian, spiritual, and formation. He finds that Christian spiritual formation is very unique if it is compared to other spiritual formations because Christian spiritual formation involves “the sovereign Christian God, the Christian Spirit, the Christian Story, the Christian community, and the Christian faith” (p. 15). As a consequence, he argues that Christians will experience a total transformation: in his or her spirit, his or her relationships with God, and other aspects of his or her life. Furthermore, he tries to provide a more comprehensive definition of Christian spiritual formation. Before he mentions his own definition, first he shared some common definitions of Christian spiritual formation from some well-known theologians and writers, then he discusses and analyzes them by focusing on five elements: “Process of change, Aim, Agents, Object, and Contexts and Means” (pp. 16-18). Finally, he formulates his own definition of Christian spiritual formation: “A Spirit- and human-led process by which individuals and communities mature in relationship with the Christian God (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) and are changed into ever-greater likeness to the life and gospel of this God” (p. 18).

In chapter 2 the author explains that the second fundamental principle regarding Christian spiritual formation is *the Christian story*. It is written in the Bible and the Bible is God’s story. He claims,

Christian spiritual formation is and must be a formation both *within* and *into* the Big Story...the story of creation, fall, redemption, restoration, and glorification... Consequently, if we

are to understand Christian spiritual formation, we must begin within the heart of the Christian message itself. (p. 24)

Therefore, he continues, both Christian spiritual formation and Christian story are one entity and cannot be separated from each other because in the one hand “how we understand this story is a big deal for our formation as Christians” and in the other hand “our formation as Christians is deeply embedded in the gospel story, however, it is narrated” (pp. 24-25).

### **The Elements of Christian Spiritual Formation**

In chapters 3 – 6 the author discusses the elements of Christian spiritual formation. He mentions that the first element, *the fullness of Christian spiritual formation*, can be achieved through “the breadth and depth of human experience” (p. 46) since it has some unique characteristics: it is both embodied and spirit (p. 46); its manifestation through our intellect (Romans 12:2), emotions (Psalm 13:21), and will (Romans 1:5; 16:26) (p. 47); it has six stages to help Christian grow: being aware, experiencing, understanding, evaluating, deciding/acting, and integrating (p. 47); it exists through relationship with nature, interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships, other spiritual realities (angels, demons), and God (p. 49); and last, it can occur at the deepest level and the center of our being: our worldviews, basic emotional concerns, and lifestyles (p. 53). He believes that these unique characteristics equip us to admit and receive God’s invitations to transform us. The second element, *the aims of Christian spiritual formation*, consist of: holiness (Greek *hagios*) and sanctification (Greek *hagiasmos*) (1 Pet.1:15-16); deification (*theosis*) (2 Pet.1:4); obedience (Rom.1:5; 16:26); kingdom of God (acts 2:42-47); and increase (Luke 1:80; 2:40; Acts 2:47). He claims that these five goals show that Christian spiritual formation is ultimately God’s work (p. 55). The third element, *the context of Christian spiritual formation*, is very complex since “human formation depends a great deal on our early development in families...” (p. 64). He mentions four types of contexts that are significant for Christian spiritual formation: culture, home, church, and fringe movements. He argues that “these contexts form the setting within which the unique gift or charisms of individuals, communities, and even

traditions are discovered and expressed” (pp. 69-70). The fourth element, *the agents of Christian spiritual formation*, are the Holy Spirit, ourselves, and the spiritual director. He claims that “Christian spiritual formation is both a Spirit- and human-led process” (p. 70). Although the Holy Spirit has a very significant role (John 3:5-8), but he stresses that we must also be proactive “to see with the eyes of faith and to act into that sight” (p. 72) and “to attend to the active presence of the Holy Spirit and to respond (Eph. 2:8, 15, 22)” (p. 75). Another proactive attitude is to ask for the help of a spiritual director to provide direction and support: “the one-on-one helping relationship” (p. 77). He mentions some spiritual direction practices from the early and medieval century such as *Abba or Amma*, a *confessor*, *care of souls*, a *conference*. Today we know some practices such as *Christian counseling*, *discipleship*, *coaching*, and *spiritual direction* (p. 77). The fifth element is *the process of transformation*. Since the transformation is a process of change, he argues that Christian spiritual formation cannot be separated from salvation because in Christian spiritual formation the “ongoing transformation into likeness to Christ” takes place (Titus 3:5; 1 Cor. 15:2) (pp. 86-87) which include “any aspect of the fullness of human experience” (p. 87). As a consequence, “salvation is manifest concretely in the lives of believers” (p. 89) and day by day they will grow “as close to the mature side of the model as one can here on earth” (p. 91). He gives some models from early and medieval centuries as the examples, but to help the readers understand the process of transformation in our context today, he provides a table of “Stages of Ongoing Christian Salvation”, starting from “The First Year of Life” stage to “Living a Mature Christian Life” stage (p. 93). The sixth element is *the task of formation*. He claims that “the task of Christian spiritual formation is simply the active cultivation of appropriate Christian transformation” (p. 96). He provides eight steps of the task of formation: *clear vision*; *strong determination*; *nurture community support*; *identify* de-formation, disorientation or ill habituation; *select* disciplines, practices, rules, circumstances, relationships, sentiments, experiences; *careful attention* to the nuances of one’s own context; *implement* an intentional program of activities; *experiment* and revise the ongoing process (pp. 97-98). These steps are useful to “concretely place ourselves in the Spirit’s path, to see the appropriate change ahead, and to cooperate with God” (p. 98). The last element is *the means of Christian spiritual formation*. Spirit, Scripture, the church are the means that God provides for Christians to cultivate growth in their relationship with Him.

However, since there is a wide range of means such as fasting, singing, self-examination, and testimony, he challenges us to “make every effort” to support our faith with goodness and so on (2 Pet.1:5-8; Luke 13:24; Rom.14:19; Eph.4:3; Heb.4:11) (p. 102). He uses the *Large Minutes of the Methodist Society* from the eighteenth century to distinguish between instituted and prudential means. The first includes “praying, studying Scripture, sharing in the Lord’s Supper, fasting and taking part in Christian conference (fellowship)” (p. 102). The latter includes “making use of particular rules for personal growth; attending class, band, or other meetings; watching against the world, devil, and besetting sins, denying oneself useless pleasures and needless food or drink; taking up one’s cross and willingly bearing whatever is grievous to our nature; and exercising the presence of God through always setting God before us” (pp. 102-103). “Different needs, different means” (p. 103) is his conclusion regarding the means of Christian spiritual formation.

### **The Practice of Christian Spiritual Formation**

In chapter 7, the author discusses *the first practice of Christian spiritual formation with regard to our relationship with God through prayer*. He mentions some important principles about prayer and challenges the readers to have deeper perspectives. First, *what is prayer?* Basically, prayer is a communication with God, but he claims that “...prayer...is not a conversation between equals. Prayer is communication between created and Creator, between saved and Savior” (p. 129). Second, *types of prayer*. Although we can pray by using different types such as simple prayer, intercession prayer, and meditative or contemplative prayer, he argues that “Formation into prayer is a matter of wisdom: the right communication for the right people at the right time” (p. 132). Third, *how we pray*. It is true that we can pray by using various ways, but he argues that the most primary way in prayer is by using Scripture because “...Scripture is central to our ways of praying. It is the Word of God. God communicates to us through the Scriptures, and Scripture gives voice to our own prayer. Many passages are themselves prayers” (p. 132). Fourth, *the spirit of prayer*. It is a common understanding that prayer is our way to have communication with God, but he argues that the most significant principle of prayer is our relationship with the Holy Spirit. He claims that “Prayer is the joining of

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spirit and Spirit” (p. 137). Fifth, *the aims of prayer*. Although the Bible records various reasons why we pray, such as asking His blessings, confessing our sins, and so on, he argues that “...an aim of Christian prayer perhaps at its deepest: mystical union with God (Colossians 1:25-27)” (p. 141).

In chapter 8, the author discusses *the second practice of Christian spiritual formation with regard to our relationships with others*. This chapter explores the communal dimension of Christian spiritual formation by dividing it into four dimensions. First, the Holy Spirit. He argues that the most primary thing in Christian spiritual formation is “*Spirit-ual* formation because the Holy Spirit of Christ is the agent of community transformation, as well as personal transformation. The Spirit ministers *to, through, and into* communities” (p. 153). Second, households. He mentions an example of how the Apostle Paul reminds the Ephesians regarding the important role of a family (Eph. 5:28; 6:4). He argues that family is not about economic advantage and social obligation, but it is more about “sharing life together in the Lord, which requires that we invest our lives and that we explore wholeheartedly the full story of the Christian gospel – including its implication in economic, social, and spiritual spheres” (p. 155). Third, the congregations. He argues that we are formed *in, by, and into* a congregation, therefore “the breadth and depth of our formation are nourished in the environment of a congregation” (p. 158). Last, the networks. In the midst of the modern age and globalization era, Christian spiritual formation must adjust itself to the current situation. Therefore, he argues that Christian formation must happen *in, as, by or through and into* a network (p. 165). He concludes this chapter by saying that “Christian spiritual formation is not merely the formation of individuals...Christian formation is also the formation of the people” (p. 171).

In chapter 9, the author discusses *the third practice of Christian spiritual formation with regard to our relationship with ourselves: intellect (thinking), emotions (feeling), and will (acting)*. He argues that even though each of these three aspects has its own unique role but they are interrelated with each other in our formation process. He says, “Paul’s own formation was a Spirit-led, interweaving transformation of his thoughts, his emotions, and his choices” (p. 177). He further explains that Paul stresses intellect (thinking) aspects in his teaching such as wisdom,

revelation, knowledge, understanding, and enlightenment (Eph. 1:17-19; 3:17-19). It is also seen in Paul's doctrinal letters (Romans 1-11; Galatians 1-4; Ephesians 1-3) (pp. 177-178). On the other side, the author explains that the Bible also uses emotions (feelings) in our formation process as Jesus did (Matt.5:4; John 2:17; Mark 3:5; Luk.13:34). He claims that "Christian spiritual formation is not only a matter of thinking. It is also a matter of feeling. Our moods, emotions, and feelings are part of the "all things" transformed by the Spirit of God..." (p. 181). The last aspect is our will (acting). He reminds us that "...when we believe a truth but do not live it in habits and morals, we have both a formational and a theological problem" (p. 185). To help us practice our faith, he provides some practical guidance on how to change a habit through the formation of our will (p. 188).

In chapter 10, the author discusses *the fourth practice of Christian spiritual formation with regard to our relationship with the world*. He challenges us to have a new paradigm about the mission, from something that *we do* to be something that *God does*. He explains the "new missions consensus" by providing an imaginary case study about St. Cuthbert church. He mentions four principles as his convictions: (1) *Mission is primarily God's work*; (2) *Our participation in God's mission is guided by our own assimilation of the gospel story*"; (3) *Mission requires that the people of God participate in the full restoration of the world in every area of life*; (4) *Mission is something that we do right here and right now* (201). Based on these four principles, he reminds us,

Our identity as Christian...is not gained through our heritage as part of centuries-old Christian culture. Rather, our identity as a church and as individuals in Christ must be rediscovered in the midst of interacting with people and groups who may be very different from us (p. 201).

In chapter 11, the author discusses the last practice of Christian spiritual formation, which is *discerning formation*. He defines discernment as "...the evaluation of inner and outer stuff – experiences, trends, ascetical strategies decisions, and so on – in light of our relationship with God with a view to the response...in light of a relationship with God, drawing from Scripture, church and Spirit" (p. 216). He focuses on two aspects. First, the best practices, virtues, and principles for discernment. He argues that "Christian discernment is



rooted in our practice of paying attention to the Holy Spirit...the Holy Spirit reveals God to us by initiating thoughts, feelings, inclinations, and such with our experience” (p. 219). Second, the wise and appropriate strategies for fostering Christian maturity in varied contexts. He argues that “Christian spiritual formation cannot be reduced to a five-step formula, or a set of ten disciplines, or phrase like ‘Let go and let God.’ Christian spiritual formation is a discerning art...it requires education, skills, procedures, and perspective” (p. 222).

### **The Ministry of Christian Spiritual Formation**

In chapter 12, the last chapter, the author discusses *the nature, challenges, and possibilities of the ministry of Christian spiritual formation*. Regarding the nature of the ministry of Christian spiritual formation, he argues that “It is the offering of one’s self and a prayerful willingness to take responsibility for the sake of cultivating appropriate transformation in others who themselves consent to the same offering” (p. 239). Next, he identifies some challenges of exercising the ministry of Christian formation: *training, responsibility, authority, motives* (pp. 240-241). In the last part, he stresses the importance of spiritual formation today. Howard claims,

I believe the ministry of Christian spiritual formation is one of the greatest needs of our time. We are today overstimulated with words and images, overconnected with acquaintances, overloaded with resources, and overburdened with the needs around us. What we need is not another menu of practices. We need people who will guide us through the appropriate practices into an authentic spiritual life. (p. 242)

### **Important Contributions**

The main contribution of Howard’s book is that he develops a more comprehensive definition of Christian spiritual formation. After analyzing some previous definitions created by several good theologians and writers (including himself) over the twenty-five years, he found general agreement in those definitions such as “the task of spiritual formation involves a process of change” (p. 16); “the aim of Christian spiritual

formation is union with Christ" (p. 17); "Holy Spirit is the primary agent of Christian spiritual formation" (p. 17); "the object of Christian spiritual formation are individuals and communities" (p. 17). However, among those definitions, he did not find the *contexts* and the *means* of Christian spiritual formation. Therefore, he adds these two more aspects in Christian spiritual formation definition: "A Spirit- and human-led process by which individuals and communities mature in relationship with the Christian God (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) and are changed into ever-greater likeness to the life and gospel of this God" (p. 18).

The other important contributions are that he does not only add those two more aspects in the definition of Christian spiritual formation, but he also explores them more deeply in chapter 4 (the contexts) and chapter 6 (the means). Regarding the first one, he addresses four types of contexts that are significant for Christian spiritual formation. First, culture. The lives of Christians cannot be separated from the cultural elements that surround them. They share activities, values, aesthetics, and habits in their daily lives so that "one's sense of spiritual experience, sacramental presence, and virtues of mature faith are all deeply informed by the cultures..." (p. 65). Second, family. He reminds us that our relationship with God is developed in a family: "Our earliest images of God often emerge in the context of our home" (p. 66). Third, congregation or parish. He mentions that through congregation Christians can have Christian education, pastoral care, and worship planning that help them in their spiritual formation. However, because information and communication technology has developed very fast, he argues that Christians today do not always depend on their local congregations but they can involve in global congregations (p. 68). The last context is countermovements. They are the people who "challenge the prevailing consensus (liberation) or simply drawn to separate themselves from that consensus (uprootedness)" (pp. 68-69).

The second one, the means of Christian spiritual formation, he discusses four important things. First, the ministry of the Spirit. He claims that "the Spirit acts as the primary agent of our formation" (p. 103). He further explains the important roles of the Holy Spirit in Christian spiritual formation: "the Holy Spirit is the revealer of truth, the initiator of moral renewal, the mediator of righteous relationships, the One who empowers us for a mission, and the stimulator of holy worship" (p. 103). Although

the role of the Holy Spirit is very important, he warns us this does not mean we are only passive because God wants us “to pay attention and then to respond to the Spirit’s active presence with an attitude of consent...” (p. 105). Second, spiritual discipline. He reminds us that spiritual discipline is “the act or habit of intentionally constraining one’s own human experience in the context of God’s active presence to achieve spiritual ends” (p. 108). To help us understand spiritual disciplines more deeply, he provides two case studies of the healthy use of spiritual disciplines (pp. 110-113). Based on those two case studies he warns us that “using spiritual disciplines for the purpose of Christian spiritual formation requires sensitivity to context, history, agents, aims, and other factors. It is an art form, not a formula” (p. 114). Third, the community of believers. He argues that formation in Christ does not only happen to individuals but it also happens in the families, churches, and Christian communities. For example, worship gatherings, preaching the Word of God, and sacraments are common practices as the means of Christian spiritual formation in the community of believers (pp. 114-117). The last one is the trials of everyday life. He reminds us that the lives of Christians are not free from problems such as disappointment, loss, emptiness, conflict, abuse, persecution, and so on. However, all of the problems of our life can contribute to our growth in Christ. He challenges us to have the right attitudes in dealing with the trials in our daily life, such as open heart, a clear mind, and strong will. So that, “by controlling ourselves in the midst of trial, we make trials a positive means of grace for our formation in Christ” (p. 118).

### **Strengths and Limitations**

One of the strongest features of *A Guide to Christian Spiritual Formation* is that Howard uses a number of imaginary case studies to help readers think about diverse aspects of the elements and the work of Christian spiritual formation. He uses different figures of these case studies: they are businessmen, young converts, spiritual directors, pastors, a seminary student, worship leader, and so on. Since they are set intentionally in different locations, cultures, and situations, these case studies help us to have a better understanding of how Christian spiritual formation is implemented in our daily lives.

In addition, this book is valuable for readers because the author provides much practical guidance by using tables and images. He also challenges us by using reflective questions at the end of every chapter. He discusses some Biblical principles and uses them as the foundations of his arguments. No wonder all of these things are very useful to help the readers have more critical, comprehensive, and reflective yet Biblical thinking regarding Christian spiritual formation.

Although Howard has included many Biblical principles in this book to support his concept about Christian spiritual formation, I think it will be better if he explores and discusses at least one person as a model in the Old Testament and also in the New Testament, so that we can learn from their experiences and struggles concretely of how they live their faith as God's chosen people. In addition, since Christian spiritual formation in this book is discussed more on the evangelicals perspective, in my opinion, it will be better if the author also explores more deeply in the other perspectives such as Catholic, Orthodox, Pentecost, Reformed, and so on, so that we will know how amazing Christian spiritual formation is.

## **CONCLUSION**

Overall, Howard challenges us to see and think more comprehensively about Christian spiritual formation. We increasingly realize that the uniqueness of Christian spiritual formation compared to others can be seen from how the role of the Holy Spirit, Scripture, community, and mission are interconnected with one another to help believers grow in their faith. Therefore, this book challenges the Christian educators, pastors, spiritual directors, and church leaders in order to be God's instruments to transform believers to have Christlike character in their life.

## **REFERENCES**

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